

Fort Matanzas National Monument
Monthly Resource Management Update
May 2, 2011

Least Terns

Least terns (*Sterna antillarum*), a bird species that is considered rare by the State of Florida, have returned to the beaches of Fort Matanzas to nest. In anticipation of this annual event, park staff (along with partners from the Florida Fish & Wildlife Conservation Commission and the National Audubon Society) pre-posted areas on either side of the inlet where terns have nested in the past.

Least terns nest in large congregations called colonies when there is favorable habitat available. Their nesting habitat of choice is very sparsely vegetated open beach that contains a significant amount of shelly, orange, coquina sand mixed in with finer white quartz sand. The terns' eggs are almost indistinguishable from the surrounding sand when they are laid in shallow "scrapes" that the birds make on the beach.

Fort Matanzas contains several acres of this prime habitat in the vicinity of the inlet, and as a result, hosts the largest colony of nesting least terns on the east coast of Florida. The first weekly survey of the colony took place on 4/19, and four nests were confirmed. A week later, the number of confirmed nests had risen to 57! This marked increase bodes well for the success of the colony, though the birds remain vulnerable to a variety of threats, including predatory animals, high tides, and vandalism. Park staff will continue to regularly monitor the colony, and will institute measures to mitigate the negative effects of colony predation.

[NATURE NOTE: Posting the least tern nesting colony consists of putting in temporary signage informing people of the need to stay out of the areas where the birds are ground-nesting. Twine is strung between the regularly spaced poles, and flagging is tied to the twine to help mark it. Inside the colony itself, spray-painted stakes are placed that divide the overall colony into sections. This is done to help people surveying the colony make accurate counts. What they are counting is the number of nests and the number of chicks/juveniles in each sub-section. (Chicks/juveniles are divided up into three categories: downy, feathered, and flight-capable.) Other information that is collected includes any disturbance to the colony, tracks in the sand, and wrack on the beach (which is an indicator of tide levels). All of this information is fed into an on-line database maintained by the state, so that trends in least tern nesting success can be followed statewide from year to year.]

Re-vegetation

Many visitors to Fort Matanzas remark on the stately and graceful beauty of the magnificent trees growing in and near the picnic area. The trees they are referring to are live oaks (*Quercus virginiana*). These particular trees are around 150 years old. Although live oaks are very long-lived, and there is no indication that the oaks at Matanzas are in any immediate danger, park staff

are acting to mitigate the eventual loss of the old giants by planting live oak seedlings throughout the visitor center/picnic area grounds. Maybe someday, many decades from now, future visitors will be eating their picnic lunches while their children play under the shade of the small seedlings we have planted this year. Only time will tell!

[NATURE NOTE: Live oaks do very well in the sandy soil and salt air along the coast. Their spreading roots, stretching as far underground as their branches above, help hold the soil in place. Their acorns provide food for many species of animals, and their shade is enjoyed by everyone. While they take a while (up to ten years) to become established, after that time, they are fairly fast growing. Their branches with many different curves and strong wood were prized by the builders of wooden ships.]